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ABSTRACT

Dissertations are products of the places and times in which they are written. For one graduate student, enrolling in the doctoral program at State University of New York (SUNY) Albany, however, not only demonstrated how creative writers, composition teachers and theorists can mix together, but also illustrated that dissertation writing is not a solitary activity at SUNY. Students at all levels of study are the first readers of each other's chapters and drafts. Genres blur, boundaries are crossed, and much writing happens. Poets, fiction writers, and writing consultants wrote rhetoric and composition dissertations which arose from interrogations of their own and institutional practices. All of the dissertations were viewed by their writers as provisional statements--not a life's work--and were completed within the 3 years of assistantship or fellowship support given to fulltime doctoral students. In addition, all of the writers are employed in colleges or universities, continuing the 100% placement rate in the rhetoric and composition portion of SUNY Albany's doctoral program. Students at SUNY not only write dissertations, but students and professors read them as well. (PRA)

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Penelope Dugan
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Blurring Genres, Crossing Boundaries, and Calling the Question: The Dissertation at SUNY Albany

To paraphrase Clifford Geertz, the dissertation--like gardening, poetry, and politics--is a craft of place. It is written in institutions cultivated for a human purpose, created by language, and subject to competing academic trends and public pressures. The place I will focus on is SUNY Albany and its doctoral program in writing, pedagogy, and theory, which was conceived in the late sixties in response to the public pressure to produce doctoral degree holders capable of *teaching* in the newly created or expanding comprehensive public colleges of that era, which reorganized itself in the late seventies in the midst of a tight academic job market to concentrate on writing, and which has now renamed itself to represent what it does, i.e., concentrate on the intersections of writing, pedagogy, and theory.

Dissertation writing is also a craft of people, and to paraphrase Rosa Luxemburg, it is in the struggles of people that the great movements of history--not to mention dissertations--are made. I will touch on four dissertations written by people at SUNY Albany: Writing Utopias: Visions of the Uses of Literacy submitted by Daniel Mahala in 1988; Resisting Writings (and the Boundaries of Composition) submitted by Derek Owens in 1989; The Role of the Writer in the Academy: Narrative, Gender, and Cultural Inscription

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submitted by Mary Ann Cain in 1990; and my own dissertation, The Pedagogy of Inclusion: Narratives of Teaching and Learning, to be submitted in 1991.

Dissertations are also products of the times in which they were written. I first started teaching composition fulltime in the City University of New York in 1973. As far as I know, there weren't any doctoral programs in rhetoric and composition then. Our credentials were hard won in our experience and practice. We learned from each other and from our students. We pondered and puzzled, shared stories, and swopped insights and assignments. When we did venture into graduate schools of education--the only places then teaching about writing--, we felt like parents of young children being told how to raise them by childless great aunts. Their theories did not address our daily lived experiences in Open Admissions classrooms. Those of our number who persisted and produced dissertations in the late seventies and early eighties wrote on things like the composing processes of six basic writers or the revision strategies of two professional and two student writers or the journal keeping practices of twenty freshman writers. Like Nadine Gordimer's character, Helen Shaw, I looked in vain in these case studies for experiences like my own and my students. Quasi-experimental studies were even more remote from my concerns since I could not conceive of teaching writing as a "treatment" and believed "control groups" did not exist.

In 1987, talking with Dixie Goswami and Nancy Sommers, I told them that since I could not comfortably read these dissertations, I knew I would never write one. Dixie said, "Find the voice to tell your story." Nancy suggested I read Judith Fishman Summerfield's Narrative Compositions: An Exploration of Narrative in the Teaching of College Composition. I sent for Summerfield's dissertation, opened to page one and read, "It is out of the stories of my own life that I come to narrative . . . ." I was hooked. I read Summerfield's patchwork quilt of a dissertation as if it were a novel. Her confident voice carried me through the twists and turns of her narrative. Her student writers were not "n's" but had names: Donna Cavanno, Andrew Sternborn, and Alexander Yadollahs. I recognized each of them. I also realized that the form of a dissertation in rhetoric and composition is malleable. Or to quote Robert Creeley's famous maxim, "Form is an extension of content."

So in 1989, I came to SUNY Albany to write the dissertation I wanted to read. My second day on campus, Lil Brannon asked what I planned to do for my dissertation. From then on, she directed all her comments on my work toward that dissertation. Steve North continued that process during my second semester of coursework, reading everything I had written and showing me I already had the contours and much of the content of the dissertation.

As I got to know the creative writers, composition teachers, and literary theorists who mix together to make up

the doctoral student population, I noticed that dissertation writing is not a solitary activity at SUNY Albany. Students at all levels of study are the first readers of each other's chapters and drafts. Required to take workshops in poetry, fiction, or prose non-fiction, we continue workshopping in out-of-class writing groups. Poets comment on chapters of dissertations about the relationship of Paolo Freire's emancipatory pedagogy to liberation theology. Fiction writers helped me shape a scene describing a classroom incident in the South Bronx. Genres blur, boundaries are crossed, and much writing happens.

The second thing I noticed about SUNY Albany doctoral students is that we read, discuss, and circulate the bound dissertations of students who have graduated. I have never met Dan Mahala or Derek Owens, but I know their dissertations well. And like Summerfield's dissertation, theirs inspire me to carry on and tell my story. I became friends with Mary Ann Cain in my first year when she was in her third year writing her dissertation, working as assistant director of the writing center, and looking for a job along with her husband, George Kalamaras, also a third year student. Mary Ann showed me it is possible to write to completion under great pressure. She gave me a copy of her dissertation as a parting gift.

Mary Ann came to SUNY Albany as a fiction writer; Derek as a poet; I don't know about Dan. All three of them wrote rhetoric and composition dissertations which arose from

interrogations of their own and institutional practices.

Mary Ann writes on the first page of her dissertation:

> This research began as my attempt to bring into conversation aspects of myself as writer, teacher, and scholar whose relationships were either intuitively felt but unvoiced or simply unrecognized, even, at times, in conflict . . . . What the following pages do, then, is to set into relation the narratives through which I know the world in these various capacities, first from the felt, phenomenal sense of lived experience, to the meta-narratives of interpreting those interpretations, and on up through the layers of interpretation which constitute that larger context called culture, with its affirming rituals and informing myths that act as a backgroup of beliefs woven invisibly in the fabric of daily life.

Derek begins his dissertation which has been accepted for publication by Southern Methodist University Press:

> What follows is one writer's attempt to investigate several modes of discourse which help demonstrate that the academy's privileging of certain methods of writing and communication over others is an inherently ethnocentric position, ultimately censoring students from numerous alternative writings resisting so-called "academic discourse." Obviously, this investigation is not exhaustive; if anything, this might be described as the record of one white male's first exploratory steps into worlds of discourse heretofore largely unknown to him.

Dan's dissertation, which grew out of his experience as a writing consultant in an African-American Studies WAC course begins:

> The trope that informs my title--writing utopias--is the connecting link between my ideological/narrative analysis of others' accounts of the liberatory potential of writing and my own vision of the possibilities and limits of the new writing pedagogies in the modern university. At one level, then, the image of writing utopias justifies a narrative analysis that draws out from various accounts of language, learning and discourse a virtual image of the forms of social

> order they assume or envision. On another level, this trope sanctions a view of pedagogy as an exercise of social imagination, as the enacting of some sort of social (and therefore political) vision.

I have given you some of our beginnings. All of the dissertations I have mentioned were viewed by their writers as provisional statements--not a life's work--and were completed within the three years of assistantship or fellowship support given to fulltime doctoral students. All of the writers are employed in colleges or universities, continuing the 100% placement rate in the rhetoric and composition portion of SUNY Albany's doctoral program.

Despite this, we are still asked peculiar questions. Interviewing at the MLA this December, I was asked by a member of an English Department search team, "Do students in your program write dissertations?" I replied, "Do you mean those things 250 to 300 pages long, with a long list of works cited, that are sometimes published by university presses?" He nodded. "Yeah," I answered, "We write them. We even read them."